

A Response to Julia French's "Mt. Olympus, Gotham City and the Metropolis: The Power of Heroism, in Shaping Cultures and Futures"

By Sam Place

"Mt. Olympus, Gotham City and the Metropolis: The Power of Heroism, in Shaping Cultures and Futures" explores the application of virtue ethics, heroism and role models in contemporary fiction and media as well as the divide between faith and religion and secularism. Mythical heroes reflect the cultural values of their time. They are the virtuous role models one ought to aspire to become. Heroes, as the author points out, first and foremost must be relatable. They must be greater than the average man, but not to an unattainable extent. They must maintain their humanity, even as they flirt with the divine. The author demonstrates this claim by using the Greek heroes as prime examples of virtuous figures who emanated courage, strength, and prowess. Such heroes frequently had a strong connection to the gods, and many were progenies of the Greek pantheon. However, these heroes of antiquity no longer appeal to modern Western society, because we no longer value those virtues nor do we, by and large, value a connection to the divine. In a post-enlightenment society, we shun the belief in the supernatural and faith in a higher power, instead relying on what man, with the help of science and technology, can do for himself. This essay argues that our modern secularist society has given birth to new virtues and thus a new class of heroes: superheroes. However, secularism has also bred nihilism and cynicism in its wake.

The essay proceeds by exploring two popular comic book figures in Western media, Superman and Batman, and explains how they each represent two different sets of contemporary cultural values and attitudes. Batman is cynical and untrusting of people, believing humanity to be corrupt. Superman is compassionate and optimistic, believing humanity to be good. Both selflessly dedicate themselves for a shared cause: justice.

These two opposing attitudes come to a head in the film *Batman V Superman: Dawn of Justice* in which the two heroes are pitted against each other due to Superman's godlike status and Batman's distrust of those in power. At the end of the film, Superman sacrifices his own life for the common good, only to be resurrected as a Christ-like figure and a symbol of hope. In conclusion, the essay argues that secularism breeds nihilism and radical autonomy and that the only way to combat the resulting hopelessness, despair, and moral decay is to reestablish a connection to the supernatural and reintroduce faith and religion into our myth, media and culture, lest society ultimately succumb to greed, cynicism and self-interest. The author calls for more media, books, movies, and television shows to have similar narratives to this film, ones that are imbued with hope and faith in forces greater than us.

First, I'd like a clarification of the term "nihilism" as it is used in this paper, especially as it is heavily emphasized and depicted as a bane of human society. The contemporary, colloquial use of the term is often very different than its philosophical origins, and even within the history of philosophy its use and meaning are fairly nuanced. Nihilism could be referring to the absence of ontological meaning or value, a lack of objective morality, a rejection of objective reality or a mixture of these. Nihilism as a theory transcends various branches of philosophy including ethics, metaphysics and epistemology, and philosophical discussion is riddled with competing definitions of the term as well as arguments declaring what separates a nihilistic viewpoint from one that is existential.

Batman seems to be an example of an existential character, not a nihilistic one. He holds fast to his principles despite his cynicism and doubt. He doesn't act out of hope, faith or belief in a higher order, and it seems to be precisely because of this lack of dependence that fuels his motivation to act, to be a force of justice where there is none. Yet the ending of the essay seems to suggest that it is Superman, the messiah figure, who we as a society ought to emulate and it is further suggested that we look to religious influence

or spiritual foundations for such figures. Why is Superman the better hero? Is Batman not the more realistic and relatable hero? Perhaps this is a misinterpretation, but it would be worth clarifying the final argument.

Second, I am unconvinced by the argument the author makes toward the end of the essay. Lack of belief in an objective and universal order, meaning, ethics, or truth does not inherently result in a lack of hope or collapse of morals and values. Thus the conclusion that society needs a messiah figure in order to produce hope or combat moral decay is not particularly convincing to me. While faith in a higher power is certainly a source of hope and courage for some, I do not think it is the only source.